

World of our (god)fathers

By Kobi Ben-Simhon

»» The market square in a Jewish village in Poland. Jewish mobsters used underhanded methods to kidnap poor Jewish girls and forced them to work as prostitutes.

Basing his conclusions on carefully culled scraps of evidence, historian **Mordechai Zalkin** states that until World War II, the underworld in Warsaw, Vilna, Odessa and other large cities was controlled largely by Jewish syndicates. By 'our' people.



He takes them out with two hands and makes room for them. The stories are spread on the table. Historian Motti Zalkin looks at the dozens of documents that he has brought up to his fifth-floor office and smiles. The characters who form the background of the history of the Jewish people are enfolded in photocopied pages, waiting for it to happen. He prefers the small-scale histories, Zalkin says. He is a historian who doesn't like to deal with the central currents.

Dr. Mordechai Zalkin, senior lecturer in the Department of the History of the Jewish People at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva, is sitting opposite shelves crammed with books. On the top shelf is a hefty collection of vodka bottles that he has brought back from his travels, during which he looked for documentary material on Jewish criminal organizations in Eastern Europe. His studies indicate that until World War II, the underworld in Warsaw, Vilna, Odessa and other large cities was controlled largely by Jewish syndicates. By "our" people.

Outside his office, workers are dragging a table along the corridor and whispering. The corridor goes on like an endless pipe, winding through a vast concrete structure, which preserves an academic silence, a late-afternoon tranquillity. Zalkin takes the conversation into the backyard of Jewish history, in mid-19th and early-20th century Eastern Europe. He spends a lot of his time there, trying to apprehend Jewish criminals who know no God.

Mystery man

The mystery surrounding the identity of "harodef hane'alam" (literally, the "pursuer who disappeared") remains intact. The so-called "pursuer" belonged to the realm of institutionalized crimes that were perpetrated in the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe 150 years ago. His identity was one of the communities' best-kept secrets. His task: to hire mercenary killers to operate against people who threatened the community. He was chosen from within a small leadership group and only the

group's members knew his identity. The local leadership entrusted him with responsibility for the community's internal security.

This man left behind a great many traces and thereby became an intriguing Jewish legend. "Every community of the time had its informers," Dr. Zalkin says. "It was a profession -- just as there was a rabbi and a shoemaker, there was also an informer. As long as the informing concerned only 'small' matters, everything proceeded smoothly -- the informer earned his pay and nothing happened. The problem arose when the informers gave the authorities information that was liable to harm the integrity of the community concretely."

This was why the communities established a security apparatus headed by an official anonymous "pursuer."

There is very little documentation on the subject, Zalkin notes:

"The Slonim community in White Russia inserted regulations concerning the 'pursuer who disappeared' into their charter. The man's position is also mentioned in the ledger of the Minsk community. In 1836 the body of a Jew was found in the river next to the town of Oshitz, in the Ukraine. The investigation turned up the fact that his name was **Yitzhak Oxman**. He was an informer, usually passing on information about Jews who evaded military service or tax payments. Some people in the community decided that Oxman had gone too far and that he, along with another Jew, **Shmuel Schwartzman**, had to be liquidated. The police investigation got nowhere. No one in the community revealed who gave the order to murder the two Jews, but the person responsible was probably the unknown 'pursuer.'"

In another case, a member of the Jewish community broke under police interrogation, revealing the existence of the secret apparatus. **Hirsch Ben Wolf**, whose father was a well-known rabbi in Vilna, left home and converted to Christianity. The view was that a convert was liable to endanger the community he sprang from, so it was decided to kidnap Ben Wolf.

Zalkin: "In the police investigation one of the Jews testified that there was an apparatus within the community with the power to harm people and even to do away with them."

While the "pursuer" remained in the shadows, Jewish underworld figures roamed the streets without fear. Everyone knew them, they even entered Jewish literature. In his work, "In the Vale of Tears," **Mendele Mocher Sforim** (penname of **Shalom Jacob Abramovitsch**, 1835 -- 1917) provides an exceptional description of one type of Jewish criminal organization, cruel and dark. In the novel Jewish mobsters use underhanded methods to kidnap Jewish girls from poor, remote towns and then force them to work as prostitutes.

This was a fairly common phenomenon. The Jewish society described here by Mendele is perverted and rotten. Sixteen-year-old Biela, from the town of Kavtsiel, falls victim to this well-oiled scheme. She was promised work in a household and one of the prostitutes explains what she must do: "The virgins of Kavtsiel are in demand here, and if they are clever and know why they are in demand, they end up getting rich and everyone is happy." The innocent Biela doesn't have a clue about what is meant, but afterward learns from the older prostitutes and the pimps how to be seductive and how to perform.

Dr. Zalkin is familiar with the phenomenon. He pulls a book by an American researcher from one of the shelves. The entire volume is about Jewish organizations that rounded up Jewish girls and sold them into prostitution. Zalkin says he can map the network of Jewish brothels in 19th-century Eastern Europe, but immediately reneges.

"That plum I won't give you," he says with pleasure.

Rubles and jewelry

One of the major episodes in which a Jewish criminal organization was involved occurred in Vilna in February 1923. It received unusual coverage in the local Yiddish paper. For four consecutive days the paper's lead stories dealt with the events.

A Jewish gang that called itself the "Gold Flag" kidnapped a boy from a wealthy family for ransom. According to the police, the man behind the kidnapping, **Berl Kravitz**, had belonged to the Capone gang in the United States a few years earlier. **Zelig Levinson**, the head of Gold Flag, gave the green light for the operation to proceed despite objections by some of the gang's members.

The kidnap victim was **Yossele Leibovitch**, a student in the Hebrew Gymnasium in Vilna. His father was a money lender. The kidnapping was done by **Abba Vitkin** and his assistant **Reuven Kantor**. The two grabbed Yossele as he left school, bundling him into a peasant cart. The ransom note sent to the family declared: "Money or death." The kidnappers demanded 15,000 rubles plus gold, diamonds and pearls in return for the boy.

Yossele was held in Vitkin's house. "The moment it became clear that a child had been kidnapped, all the forces aligned themselves against Gold Flag," Zalkin says. "The Jewish community, the police -- everyone cooperated." A wave of arrests followed. Finally the gang decided that enough was enough and returned the boy to his neighborhood. That same day the headline of the local paper was "How the kidnapped boy was returned." The sub-headline, Zalkin says, translating from the Yiddish, was "Yossele Leibovitch's own story; 12 arrested, including the member of the Capone gang in America; how the child kidnapper was caught."

The next day the paper's lead story described how the police reached the kidnappers. The headline of March 1 revealed that "Gold Flag planned to kidnap another child." The rival organization to Gold Flag was the "Brothers Society," the federation of the Jewish thieves in Vilna -- they even had a secretary who represented the society vis-a-vis the community's institutions. One of the society's missions was to provide legal assistance to members that were arrested and placed on trial, and to smuggle people who were wanted by the police out of the city. The Brothers Society was known for the original names its members were given -- such as "Yankele the Pipe," "Avraham the Anarchist," "Tall Elinke" and "Arka Moneybags."

"The thieves and criminals were part of the local folklore, part of the daily reality. The Jewish underworld was also reflected in song, in literature and in the press," Zalkin says as he takes out a book of old folk songs and recites one of them. "There is music for it, too," he says. "Here, this song tells about someone whose mother is a thief and whose father is a thief, whose sister does what she does and whose brother is a smuggler." Looking up from the page, Zalkin explains that historians ascribe great importance to folk songs. "They spring from the actual situation, they are very authentic, a very important way to express social feelings."

A report dated February 1905 from the Hebrew paper *Hazman* ("The Time"), which was published in Vilna, sheds light on one of the sophisticated methods of operation of the Jewish criminals. They seem to have had no shame. According to the item, **Gershon Sirota**, one of the world's leading cantors, was robbed. "They did steal clothing and other items," the paper states, adding that the thieves let it be known to the cantor that they were ready to return the property, on one condition: "That he pay them a ransom of 25 rubles in cash and pray in the synagogue twice out of turn ... Because the prayer leader has been stingy with prayers and thus their profits were reduced and they couldn't make money."

Zalkin explains:

"They wanted something very precise from him. The thieves asked Sirota to give cantorial concerts in midweek, because on Shabbat people didn't bring their wallets with them to the synagogue, and the thieves needed a crowd with wallets and purses. The two concerts in fact took place, the pickpockets had plenty of work and the cantor's property was returned to him."

School for thieves

Vilna was not an exceptional hothouse of crime. Organizations like Gold Flag and the Brothers Society operated also in Warsaw, Odessa, Bialystok and Lvov. Zalkin explains the context: The late 19th and early 20th century were bad years, in which the Jews of Eastern Europe did their best simply to survive. People didn't know

where their next meal was coming from, whole families were crowded into cellars the size of a regular room. Masses of people lived from hand to mouth. Whoever could, emigrated, mainly to America. Between 1888 and the outbreak of World War I, in 1914, two million Jews from Eastern Europe moved to America.

These people were driven not by great ideologies but by sheer want. At the same time, though, the want nourished the ideologies. "For days on end I was genuinely hungry," **Ben-Zion Dinur** (1884-1973), a historian who was Israel's education minister from 1951-1955, wrote in his autobiography, "In a World that Declined." Poverty and a sense of hopelessness were fertile ground for people searching for a detour en route to making a living.

"People realized that they had little prospect of advancing on the normal track," Zalkin notes.

"The major catalyst for the consolidation of the Jewish criminal organizations was poverty, poverty so profound that there was no chance to break out of it. The Jews had it even harder, because they were a minority within a majority that placed restrictions on them."

Until World War I, however, Jews had been a key element in the population of Eastern Europe. "From a certain point of view, these were Jewish cities," Zalkin explains. "For example, 50 percent of the residents of Vilna were Jews. Because most of the cities had a large Jewish population, it follows that the percentage of Jews involved in crime was also [proportionately] high. The biggest gangster in Odessa, a huge city, was none other than **Benya Krik**" -- the same one from the title of the book by the Soviet-Jewish author **Isaac Babel**: "*Benya Krik, The Gangster, and Other Stories.*"

Jews could be found at almost all levels of underworld activity, from the individual thief to gangs that numbered more than 100 members. The large organizations operated in the cities, which they divided into sectors among themselves. Each organization had a charter, a clear hierarchy and internal courts, and its work was divided according to different areas, such as theft, protection money, prostitution, pickpocketing and murder. The art of crime was treated seriously, as it was a major source of livelihood for many people. Between the world wars the idea was even raised of establishing a school for thieves in Vilna. It's not known if the idea was put into practice.

In 19th-century Russia the best place to rob people was on the roads. There weren't enough policemen and there were a great many forests. The convoys that traveled the roads were easy pickings. **Saul Ginzburg**, one of the important historians of Russian Jewry, describes groups of Jewish thieves, whom he calls "toughs and predators." After the heist the thieves slipped away into the woods. A typical gang

of roadside robbers numbered between 10 and 15 men, who provided for themselves and their families by means of their booty.

One of the most famous roadmen, **Dan Barzilai**, a Jew by all accounts, who ran a well-known gang of thieves in the Warsaw area, was captured in 1874. His gang had 27 members, 14 of them Jews. They descended upon estates around Warsaw and attacked merchants' coaches on the roads, making off with furs, jewelry and horses. A Polish researcher found statements made by the accused men after their arrest, as preserved in the files of the police. The statement by the accused, **Yaakov Yankel**, began as follows: "I am Yaakov Yankel from the city of Yanov. My mother Leah is still alive, my father died six years ago. I am 24 years old."

Yankel went on to describe the robbery in the wake of which he was apprehended, along with seven of his accomplices:

"We were standing in the forest next to Glokhov, without going onto the road. We left the wagons in the forest, and two of us, Hershak the wagoner and Shlomke, and we eight went by foot to the estate. Dan and Lieber had three pairs of pistols and wore masks ... First they started to smash windows ... We stayed there for about an hour and filled up three bags with things and then went to the wagons."

No end to information

Mordechai Zalkin has spent much of the past 13 years burrowing in Eastern European archives. They are his laboratory, the place where he looks for the remote margins of Jewish history and brings them to life in his academic work.

"When I work in an archive in Eastern Europe, and it doesn't matter whether it's in St. Petersburg or Moscow, one of the things that interests me is the collection of police files," he says. "What used to be classified intelligence files are now open. The police collected information as part of their work, and when I open the files, from 150 years ago, I find detailed reports about Jewish criminals. The archives have enough material for 100 historians and for 100 years, and even then they won't finish."

Zalkin is respectful of every document he finds. "This, for example, is a document from 1820, from the archives in Lithuania," he says, holding it up. It's a leaflet, in Yiddish and Polish, published by the rabbinical and political leaderships of one of the Jewish communities, threatening a boycott of anyone who engages in smuggling or gives shelter to smugglers.

"At that time the Jews smuggled everything that moved and in some places the Russian authorities pressured the leaders to take action before they intervened,"

Zalkin relates. "A leaflet like this shows that smuggling was a concrete social phenomenon that characterized the Jewish community, not a marginal issue."

The task of reconstruction is long and arduous and ridden with disappointments. It's only rarely that a lead turns up that can be followed, in the form of the description of an event in the local press, a detail from a book, a document of a Jewish community. This triggers an exhausting search for additional details and cross-references, with the constant expectation of the moment at which the picture will begin to clarify itself and metamorphose into a coherent story. "In the end it's all stories," Zalkin says. "We historians, like journalists, are always after a good story."

The most exciting moments in the archives are not necessarily related to Zalkin's specific field of research. Holocaust survivors and relatives of Zalkin who know about his work in Eastern Europe often ask him to look for information about their families. One woman, for example, furnished him with information about her older brother, who was a student at the university in Kovno, was taken away by the Nazis and never heard from again. "I knew which university he attended, so I was able to find his student file," Zalkin says. "I brought the whole file to Israel, including letters he wrote, certificates and a photograph of him. It is very moving to hold a file like that in one's hands."

The Haganah connection

The Jewish mobsters in the United States are far more widely known than those of Eastern Europe and have been the subjects of quite a few films and books. The gangsters **Bugsy Siegel** and **Meyer Lansky** have become legendary figures.

Ten years ago Prof. **Robert Rockaway**, from the department of Jewish history at Tel Aviv University, published the first important study of these criminal organizations (in English: "*But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters*," Gefen Publishing House, paperback edition, 2000). According to Rockaway's findings, the vast majority of the Jewish criminals in America were from Eastern Europe or the sons of immigrants from there. They did not continue a tradition of crime, but created a home-grown tradition in their new homeland.

Generally, the reason for their criminal activity was not to obtain bread, but butter. Most of the Jewish criminals in the U.S. were from working-class families and grasped at a very early age that hard work was not a recipe for economic advancement. They didn't have capital to invest, and the underworld offered a way to get rich quick.

Jews were among the biggest criminals in the U.S. at the beginning of the last century. "In terms of crime they did everything," Rockaway says. "Drugs, murder,

smuggling alcohol. They had no limits. A Jew, **Arnold Rothstein**, was the head of the New York underworld in the 1920s. He created the largest gambling empire the U.S. have ever seen until then. He controlled most of the gangs in New York, including drugs and liquor. Rothstein was the first entrepreneur in the U.S. who created a well-oiled organization to smuggle liquor during Prohibition."

Another Jew, **Abner Zwillman**, ruled the crime syndicate in New Jersey for 30 years from his Newark base. As a boy he acquired the nickname "Der Langer," "the Tall One" in Yiddish, or "Longy" in the Jersey version. Together with another Jew, **Joseph Reinfeld**, he ran the largest and most profitable contraband organization in the U.S. The two imported about 40 percent of the alcohol that entered the country during the Prohibition era. U.S. Treasury officials stated that between 1926 and 1933 Zwillman took in more than \$40 million from his smuggling operation (more than half-a-billion dollars in today's terms). He translated his vast economic clout into political power. In the 1940s, the mayor of Newark, three of his deputies and four city councilmen needed his approval to get the nod for their posts.

Jewish-American gangsters also helped in the struggle for Israel's creation during the 1940s. In his book, Rockaway describes how an emissary of the pre-state Haganah defense organization (the forerunner of the Israel Defense Forces) approached Meyer Lansky, one of the major players in the crime scene in America, and with his intervention, shipments of weapons and military equipment were smuggled out of New York harbor, bound for Palestine. Lansky wasn't the only one. According to Rockaway, other Jews from the underworld donated tens of thousands of dollars to the Haganah.

Shmuel Isser's bunker

Members of the Jewish underworld are absent from the well-known narrative of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943, but were involved in the day-to-day life of the ghetto, and their connection to the Jewish underground groups during the uprising is a fascinating episode. The Nazi Aktion to liquidate the ghetto was launched on the eve of Passover, 1943. When the Nazis encountered resistance they used flamethrowers to set fire systematically to building after building in the ghetto. On May 8 they uncovered the central bunker of the Jewish Fighting Organization, at 18 Mila Street. What is less known is that this symbol of tenacity of the revolt, the fighters' headquarters, where the commander of the uprising, **Mordechai Anielewicz**, fought until his death, belonged to the Jewish criminal **Shmuel Isser**.

Prof. **Israel Gutman** from the Yad Vashem Holocaust remembrance authority, who took part in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising as a boy of 15, doesn't remember Isser. "I can't say that I spoke with a character like that," Gutman says. "The underground was an ideological body which didn't have anything to do with people

like that." On the other hand, Gutman definitely acknowledges the contribution of underworld types to the life of the community in the ghetto.

"The criminal organizations in the ghetto were somehow able to create an important mode of existence," he says. "The ghetto lived from smuggling -- above the wall, through the gates by cajoling the police, under the wall. The property that remained in the hands of the Jews was transferred to the other side [of the wall], and that is what the criminal organizations dealt in. It was a highly organized business."

As for the fighting against the Nazis, Gutman says, the criminal groups "played a minimal role. Their main involvement was in smuggling, which was the ghetto's key to life. They also employed a great many assistants. There was an underground economy in the ghetto -- workshops, small, illegal factories, which created a survival base for quite a few people in the ghetto. The economic foundation that those organizations created helped support the community's existence." In his book on the Jews of Warsaw during the war years, Gutman estimates that 80 percent of the ghetto's foodstuffs were smuggled in.

The professional smugglers -- a euphemism for underworld figures -- lived a debauched life in the ghetto. They made a great deal of money very quickly and became the social elite. They brought in luxury items such as sweets or other goods that earned them large profits. In the book, Gutman quotes one person's testimony: "**The smugglers had enormous revenues ... most of them accumulated millions.** The smugglers were the richest class in the ghetto and were glaringly set apart from the gray, meager and hungry Jewish quarter. The easy profits and the uncertainty about tomorrow led the smugglers to spend all their spare time drinking, visiting night clubs and in the company of women."

In the end, the admired fighters and the members of the underworld linked up. Based on their ideological approach, the members of the Jewish Fighting Organization did not build bunkers. Their basic assumption was that they would fight to the end, so no withdrawal or escape routes were planned (the other underground group in the ghetto, the Jewish Military Organization, led by the Revisionists, built a protected, well-equipped bunker with an underground passage out of the ghetto). When the members of the Jewish Fighting Organization found that they could no longer move about and hide aboveground, because of the Germans' flamethrowers, they had no choice but to take cover in underground bunkers. The largest and best equipped of these fortified sites were those of the underworld.

According to **Havi Ben Sasson**, 32, a doctoral student who works at the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem, the Jewish criminal organizations were part of the Warsaw landscape. In the course of a few hours of archival research and reading of testimonies, she was able to come up with a great

deal of information: "At Mila 18, which became one of the symbols of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, a concrete connection existed between the Jewish underworld and the Jewish Fighting Organization," Ben Sasson says. "In fact, that bunker was built by and belonged to people from the Warsaw underworld. It was a huge shelter, with a number of rooms, a power hookup and even a well for water. Tremendous amounts of food were stored there, which the underworld was able to bring into the ghetto, thanks to its connections with the Polish underworld."

The leader of the bunker was Shmuel Isser, Ben Sasson says. He dealt mainly in the production of illegal goods, which were smuggled out of the ghetto.

"We have a number of testimonies about this from fighters who survived," she notes. "Those who succeeded in getting out of the bunker definitely say that the bunker belonged to people of the underworld and that the fighters were received their like princes. Shmuel Isser's bunker was intended to hold his family, which numbered between 80 and 100 people. It was one of the best equipped bunkers in the ghetto.

"Every self-respecting bunker made sure it had weapons for self-defense, and the members of the underworld were definitely self-respecting, so I have no doubt that weapons were stored there, too. That was why the Jewish Fighting Organization chose Mila 18. What happened was that the people of the underworld let the people of the underground into their bunker. According to testimonies, the underworld people also served as guides for the fighters. They were familiar with the ghetto even after it was burned and its form changed."

False image

This is actually a war of images. Dr. Zalkin wants to draw us a different social portrait. "What interests me is the ordinary person," he says. "I am not interested so much in the great rabbis and the philosophers. I am interested in the society, the people. My studies go in that direction. As a social historian, I map and classify the society, and when I came to all the places that have to do with the social history of the Jews in the 19th century and in the period between the world wars, I didn't have to go looking for crime. It was simply there, leaping up everywhere."

In his Jerusalem home Zalkin has a large collection of books on crime. Criminals would never believe how much has been written about them. He himself isn't sure what attracts him to these dark corners -- to these dubious, often violent, characters.

"The assumption among researchers is that your field of study doesn't necessarily say anything about your inclinations," Zalkin says evasively, but adds an argument that is both very mainstream and very provocative.

"In my view, what shapes the great historical processes is not the great figures, but the masses. You can ask of any historical study why it is important. Why is it important to study **Moses Mendelssohn**, or **David Ben-Gurion**? In my opinion, historical research is vastly important for shaping the contemporary consciousness of the society. What I want to say is that beyond my interest as a historian, the contribution of this research lies in understanding that, with all respect to us, the image that all the Jewish children went to heder [religious school] and studied Torah and were great religious scholars is mistaken or invented. My argument is that the Jews were a normal society."

If this conversation had taken place before World War II, that argument would not have surprised anyone. Jewish society knew itself. "[After the Holocaust](#)," Zalkin says, "[there was an inclination to view the Jewish world through a rosier prism](#). Zionist historiography had a vested interest in drawing a distinction between the 'new Jew,' the pioneer-farmer, and the wretched, pale ghetto Jew who studied in the yeshiva and was a moneylender. The image today is that they were all righteous and saintly. But it just wasn't so." ■

David Irving comments:

I MAKE no apologies for reproducing this Ha'aretz article. Once again Ha'aretz excels itself in its objectivity and even-handedness: it is a credit to journalism.

Imagine the outcry if a non-Jewish historian had produced this piece of reporting. Imagine the fury of Prof. **Richard "Skunk" Evans**, as expert witness in the resulting trial for race hatred"!

Remember, Evans refused even to believe that the Nazi police figures on Jewish insurance frauds in Weimar Berlin could be anything but propaganda.

Now here is laid bare the whole stinking world of the criminality and mafia gangsterism that flourished in Eastern Europe in the final years before Adolf Hitler's armies arrived to wipe the slate clean.

As this author writes, the surviving perpetrators fled, to the United States and other countries, and the scenario is quietly starting all over again. See the "relevant stories" flagged at the bottom of this page: the sex slave trade, the global narcotics smugglers, and other racketeering and organised crime coming from that same corner of humanity.

Why us? they inevitably whine, as they are hauled away, the patience -- and purses -- of their hosts exhausted once again. Dr **Mordechai Zalkin** provides some of the answers. ■

"When I work in an archive in Eastern Europe, and it doesn't matter whether it's in St. Petersburg or Moscow, one of the things that interests me is the collection of police files," he says. "What used to be classified intelligence files are now open. The police collected information as part of their work, and when I open the files,

from 150 years ago, I find detailed reports about Jewish criminals. The archives have enough material for 100 historians and for 100 years, and even then they won't finish."